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ABSTRACT

Meeting the needs of students who are below their grade level in spelling ability is a continual problem for elementary teachers. Much has been learned over the past 15 years about how children learn to spell in the primary grades. Developmental spelling sequences have gained credibility and developmental spelling theory has provided important diagnostic and instructional guidance to primary teachers. In helping poor spellers progress, teachers must first diagnose the level of ability at which students are operating. To do this, the teacher must decide what aspects of children's performance predict their future spelling achievement. Once the instructional level is determined for groups of children and appropriate spelling materials have been located for each group, the traditional practice of having children study, memorize, and take weekly tests on graded lists of words should be initiated. The key to an effective spelling program is the establishment of a strong classroom writing program in which the teacher monitors and comments on the children's spelling. (This essay reports on an actual fourth grade classroom, and includes tables of data and graded spelling lists from the Qualitative Inventory of Word Knowledge.) (JD)

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Meeting the Needs of Poor Spellers in the Elementary School: A Developmental Perspective

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Meeting the Needs of Poor Spellers in the Elementary School:

A Developmental Perspective

November 1986

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Meeting the Needs of Poor Spellers in the Elementary School: A Developmental Perspective

Meeting the needs of students who are below grade level in spelling ability continues to be a nagging problem for elementary school teachers. The problem is exacerbated by a tendency in our schools to use grade-level spelling materials for all students in a class regardless of differences in the students' spelling ability. The present article will provide a rationale for differentiating spelling instruction in the classroom according to ability level. Diagnosis of children's spelling will be discussed, and a classroom instructional plan will be offered. Before approaching these topics, however, let us look briefly at recent developmental research in spelling that helps to explain how very young children (kindergarten to second grade) progress in learning to spell English words.

Learning to Spell in the Primary Grades

Much has been learned over the past 15 years regarding the development of spelling ability in young children. Beginning with Read's pioneering studies (1971, 1975), one can cite the important contributions of Beers & Henderson (1977), Chomsky (1971, 1979), Gentry (1978), Henderson (1981, 1985), and Zutell (1979). Figure 1 presents in an abbreviated format what these researchers have discovered.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Once children know how to write some letters of the alphabet, their early semi-phonetic spellings include the beginning consonant and sometimes the consonant boundaries (beginning and end) of one-syllable words (see Figure 1). Next comes a phonetic stage where vowels begin to appear in the children's spellings. In this stage, the children "sound their way through" the word to be spelled, making one-to-one, sound-letter matches as they write. Long vowels are represented with the corresponding letter-name (mail - MAL: feet - FET). Short vowels are also represented with letter-names, but curiously with those letter-names that bear a phonetic similarity to the specific short vowel sound (i.e., ă - A; ĕ - A; Ĭ - E; ŏ - I; ŭ - O). Thus, dress might be spelled DRAS; stick, STEK, and mud, MOD. Note: see Gentry (1978) or Morris (1981) for a more complete explanation of this phenomenon.

With extended opportunities to read and write, many first graders move into a transitional spelling stage near the end of the school year. Now the children begin to represent short vowels "correctly" (stick - STIC) and to mark long vowels (feet - FEAT), even though the vowel markers are often misplaced. Transitional spellings indicate that the children are beginning to abandon their concept of spelling as a fixed, one-to-one, sound-letter code. Instead these young spellers are searching actively for the legitimate patterns of letters (CVC, mat; CVVC, tail, CVCe, lake) that actually map the sounds of the spoken language to the English spelling system.

The developmental spelling sequence described above has gained more and more credibility over the last seven years as the stage principles have been validated time and again by researchers and classroom teachers across the country. In fact, armed with evidence that early spelling is not a "right/wrong" but rather a developmental phenomenon, many kindergarten, first and second grade teachers have begun to emphasize more writing in the classroom, while de-emphasizing the need for standard spelling. The idea is that young children can use "invented spelling" to express themselves freely in writing, and the teacher can then use these writing products to monitor the children's development in spelling. For example, note the two writing samples below:

(1) my bik git stol.
I git stg biy a bee.
my had git bas (busted)
on the stap.
I fel oof my bik
bet I ded not kiy.

(Albert -
Phonetic Stage Speller -
Late First Grade)

(2) A week a go my fothr
bot a peeingpong tabole
but I nevr beet my
bit bruthr. Me and my big

sistr pracdis then my
big bruthr beet me 25-23
and I whus happe becus
that meens that soon I will
beet him.

(Leon -
Transitional Stage Speller -
Late-First Grade)

Albert is clearly a phonetic stage speller. He fails to mark long vowels (BIK, STOL) and he often represents short vowel sounds with a letter-name substitution (HAD for head, DED for did). On the other hand, Leon, Albert's classmate, has moved into the transitional stage of spelling. He is representing short vowels correctly (NEVR, SISTR), and he is beginning to mark long vowels (BEET, MEENS). The important point is that Albert's and Leon's teacher can look at the writing samples and judge where these children are conceptually in their spelling development. With more reading and phonics instruction, along with plenty of opportunities to write, these two first graders will move forward in spelling. That is, Albert will begin to show signs of transitional stage spelling, and Leon will begin to spell more and more words correctly.

Developmental spelling theory has provided important diagnostic/instructional guidance for those entrusted with teaching writing and spelling in the primary grades (K-2).

Ironically, the same theory has probably raised more questions than it has answered for teachers in grades three through six. For example:

- Do the same developmental stage characteristics apply to the spelling of multisyllabic fourth and fifth grade words?

- Should a fourth grade teacher adopt the same position as a first grade teacher toward misspellings in children's writing assignments?

- If spelling <u>is</u> a developmental process integrally related to children's growth in reading and writing, should spelling really be a separate subject in the curriculum to be taught directly via the weekly memorization of graded word lists?

- Given a developmental perspective, how are individual differences in spelling ability to be handled by the classroom teacher?

- Etc.

In a recent book, Henderson (1985) has thoughtfully addressed these questions and others. <u>Teaching Spelling</u>, spanning instruction in grades one through eight, attempts to meld a developmental perspective with what Henderson considers to be sound, traditional practice in classroom spelling instruction. The book is highly recommended.

One interesting link between spelling in the early elementary grades (K-2) and in the later grades (3-6) is suggested by the term "developmental." We know that first graders advance through the developmental spelling sequence at different rates, creating a spread of spelling ability among children at the end of first grade. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find even greater differences in children's spelling ability two or three years later--e.g., in a third or fourth grade classroom. The specific developmental patterns may not be as clear in these later grades, but certainly children will continue to progress at different learning rates. This presents a major problem to classroom teachers responsible for teaching spelling in grades three through six; that is, how does one provide adequate instruction for those students who are performing below grade level in spelling? In the remainder of this article, we will explore this question from the perspective of a hypothetical fourth grade teacher.

Classroom Diagnosis: Fourth Grade Spelling

Each September during the first week of school, Mrs. Jones, a fourth grade teacher, administers a spelling test to her class. Over the years, she has found her students' performance on the informal test (25 words randomly selected from the fourth grade spelling book) to be a good predictor of their ultimate success in the fourth grade spelling curriculum. Table 1 shows the performance of Mrs. Jones' students on this year's beginning-of-year spelling test.

Insert Table 1

Based on her past experience with the test, Mrs. Jones quickly looks at the children's power scores (% correct) and predicts, with some self-confidence, how well individual students will do in the fourth grade spelling program. For example, she predicts that Thomas (84%) and Bernice (64%) will do well, but that Frederick (32%) will experience difficulty.

Granting for a moment the accuracy of Mrs. Jones' prediction, the interesting question becomes: What aspects of the children's performance on the September spelling test allow one to forecast their future spelling achievement? Is it that children scoring high on the spelling pretest (Thomas and Bernice), as opposed to those scoring low (Frederick), simply know how to spell more fourth grade words to start with, and therefore have fewer words to master during the school year? Undoubtedly there is some commonsense truth in this explanation. However, a less obvious but equally plausible explanation of the spelling test's predictive power can be found by looking at the spelling errors made by individual children.

Insert Table 2

Notice in Table 2 that there are differences in the

quality of spelling errors made by Thomas and Bernice versus those made by Frederick. The errors made by the first two children are "readable," there is a vowel in each syllable, and for the most part only one feature is inappropriate in each misspelling (e.g., NATCHURE - nature; POPED - popped; CABBEGE - cabbage). Frederick's misspellings tell a different story. That is, his errors are difficult to read (CRLU, SCRUE); he sometimes omits vowels in multi-syllable words (CBAGE, PREPRING); and oftentimes he misspells more than one feature in a word (NATCHER - nature; TRAFTCK - traffic).

If we acknowledge that there are qualitative differences between the misspellings of Frederick and Bernice, for example, on the September spelling test, how might this affect the respective spelling achievement of these two fourth graders during the school year? To answer this question we must consider how spelling is usually taught in the elementary grades. For example, each week there is a Monday pretest on 20 to 25 new spelling words. The children generally self-correct the pretest with the teacher's help, thereby determining which words they missed and need to study carefully that week. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, the children practice the spelling words by copying them, using them in written sentences, or by completing fill-in-the-blank exercises on selected spelling workbook pages. Finally, on Friday, there is the weekly spelling test, and a record of each child's performance on the test (% correct) is recorded.

Now, let us speculate that during a given week in December, Frederick misspells 10 of 20 words on the Monday pretest, and Bernice misspells 5 of 20 (not an unlikely occurrence given their September spelling test results). Furthermore, note below how each child misspells four of the pretest words:

spelling word	Bernice	Frederick
baggage	BAGGEGE	BAGIJ
future	FUTCHURE	FUCHER
nature	NATCHURE	NACHER
luggage	LUGGIGE	LOGICH

Within this one-week context, the question of learning or achievement comes into clearer focus. Which child has the more difficult task of mastering the weekly list of 20 spelling words? Frederick, of course. Not only does he enter the week knowing how to spell correctly fewer of the words on the list (10 to Bernice's 15), but also Frederick's spelling errors on the list words are more primitive or less sophisticated than are Bernice's errors. During the week, when Frederick attempts to memorize the correct spellings of certain words (e.g., baggage and luggage), he will have to concentrate on a number of spelling features: the doubled medial consonant (gg), the schwa vowel in the second syllable (a), and the "soft g" ending (-ge). Bernice, on the other hand, will need to attend only to how the second syllable schwa vowel is represented in these words. Thus, not only will Frederick

have to learn more spelling words during the week, but also he will need to learn a good deal more about individual spellings (e.g., baggage and luggage) than will his classmate.

Naturally, we would expect Bernice to achieve a higher score than Frederick on the Friday, end-of-week spelling test. And even if Frederick, through concentrated memorization effort, does manage a high score on the Friday test, we might question how good his retention of these spelling words will be two to three weeks later.

If we project the one-week scenario above across a school year's worth of spelling instruction (35 weeks), it becomes apparent why Frederick will experience more difficulty and learn less in the fourth grade spelling curriculum than will Bernice. It seems that Mrs. Jones' original prediction regarding the two children's potential growth as fourth grade spellers was a good one.

Instructional Implications

If Frederick and the five other children who scored 32% or less on the September spelling test (see Table 1) are conceptually "over their heads" in a fourth grade spelling program, what can Mrs. Jones do? One defensible course of action is presented below.

(1) In September, Mrs. Jones can administer a third grade spelling list of 25 words (see Appendix) to her lowest 6 spellers to see if these children can function successfully

at this lower spelling level. Table 3 below shows how the children's third and fourth grade accuracy scores might compare.

Insert Table 3

Frederick, who spelled 60% of the third grade list accurately, made the following errors:

batter	- BATER	chasing	- CHASEING
scream	- SCREEM	thirsty	- THRISTY
knock	- KNOK	baseball	- BASBALL
careful	- CAREFULL	handle	- HANDEL
stepping	- STEPING	sudden	- SUNDEN

If we compare Frederick's third grade spelling errors above with the errors he made on the fourth grade list (see Table 2), we find a significant difference. Frederick is more "in control" of the spelling process on the third grade list; his misspellings on this list might be termed "readable near-misses." That is, there is generally only one feature in each word that he needs to attend to in order to master the correct spelling. Clearly third grade seems to be a more appropriate level for providing Frederick--and his classmates shown in Table 3--with spelling instruction.

(2) The next step is for Mrs. Jones, a fourth grade teacher, to find third grade spelling books for her low functioning spellers. Six spelling books can be borrowed

from the third grade teachers in the school, or the books can be purchased from the publisher.

With the spelling books secured, Mrs. Jones can begin her weekly teaching routine. On Monday, two different spelling pretests can be administered simultaneously; one to the high group (fourth grade words), and one to the low group (third grade words). For example, with the two spelling lists before her, Mrs. Jones might say:

> Red Group, here is your first word: "bundle."
> Blue Group, here is your first word: "street."
> [Pause to let the children write.]
> Red Group, word #2 is "badge."
> Blue Group, #2: "bread." [Pause.]
> Red Group, #3 ... And so on through the 20-word lists.

Regarding the Tuesday-through-Thursday spelling practice activities, the third grade-level spellers and fourth grade-level spellers can simply work in their respective workbooks. Finally, the Friday posttests for the two groups can be administered in the same manner as the Monday pretests.

Whenever a teacher commits to working with a group of children in below grade-level materials (whatever the subject area), she may begin to question in her own mind whether she is actually doing the children a service or disservice. For example, she may ask herself: Are these students learning enough? Should they really be working at grade level? Are they just getting further behind their classmates as the weeks go by?

Fortunately, the Monday spelling pretest - Friday spelling postest format serves as a sensitive monitoring device that allows the classroom teaching to address the questions above on a weekly basis. In Mrs. Jones' third grade-level spelling group, for example, if Frederick and his classmates are, for the most part, scoring between 50% and 80% accuracy on the Monday pretest, and above 90% on the Friday posttest, Mrs. Jones can rest assured that she has placed these students appropriately in third grade spelling materials. This is not to say that Frederick's group must remain in the third grade spelling book for the entire school year. Mrs. Jones may decide to move her low spelling group into the fourth grade spelling book at mid-year or later. Nonetheless, whatever the grade-level or difficulty-level of the spelling lists, the Monday pretest - Friday posttest scores will provide ongoing evidence of the children's spelling progress.

(3) A third step Mrs. Jones can take to meet the needs of her low functioning spellers is to establish a vigorous writing program in the classroom. Writing is a communication medium that allows children to create, explore and reason with ideas; it is also the medium in which spelling is best practiced. A fourth grader, writing a 150-word story or report at the cutting edge of his/her language competence, is practicing spelling in the context in which it should be practiced. That is, the child is attempting to spell words that are personally meaningful to him/her. Also, in affording sheer quantity of spelling practice, writing (across all

subject areas during the school day) clearly outstrips what little practice can be offered in a 15 minute spelling workbook exercise.

Although a writing program provides children with extended opportunities to explore new spelling forms and to practice old forms, a teacher can sometimes enhance a given writing sample's impact on a child's spelling by judiciously calling the child's attention to certain misspelled words in the sample.

> The moon crechers were
> chassing them. Liono dasidid
> to run for it. He grabed
> the child and took of up
> the mauton...

In the writing exerpt above, Frederick, our poor-spelling fourth grader, misspelled six words. However, the teacher circled only three of his errors, two of which (chasing and grabbed) happened to illustrate a spelling principle (consonant doubling) that had recently been covered in the third grade spelling book. The circle drawn around the word by the teacher signals Frederick to try spelling it a different way and to be ready to defend, verbally, his second spelling attempt. Such an editing procedure has several advantages:

a) The teacher controls how many spelling words individual children are asked to edit. For some children, eight to ten words can be circled for editing; for others, possessing less

spelling ability and lower frustration tolerances, three to four circled words will suffice.

b) The teacher holds children responsible for editing only those misspellings that are within their knowledge range. In our present example, the misspelled patterns in grabbed and chasing had been previously taught, and Frederick's misspelling of off was clearly a careless error. On the other hand, it would have made little sense to have Frederick attempt self-editing his misspellings of creatures and decided, unless the teacher's aim was to encourage the child to use the dictionary.

c) The child, not the teacher, is responsible for editing the misspelled words. Instead of the teacher writing in correct spellings on the student's paper, the responsibility for actually changing misspellings is given to the student. Even incorrect second attempts on the child's part can be instructive. For example:

word	child's first attempt	child's second attempt	(comment)
sheet	SHET	SHEAT	aware of long vowel pattern
closed	CLOSD	CLOSSED	unsure about consonant doubling
carefull	CARFULL	CAREFULL	suffix work?

An editing procedure similar to the one described above involves the teacher placing a check (✓) in the margin

alongside a line of writing in which there is a spelling error. The child's editing task is to find the misspelled word in the line, circle it, and then try to spell it correctly (see Schwartz, 1977).

It should go without saying that procedures for editing spelling should always follow, not precede the teacher's initial response to the meaning of what the student has written. Furthermore, editing of spelling errors need not be done for every piece of writing children complete. Nonetheless, over the course of a school year, a thoughtful teacher can diagnose and teach a good deal about English spelling via the informal editing of children's writing.

Concluding Remarks

This article has taken a developmental perspective regarding the teaching of spelling in the elementary grades. Focusing on meeting the needs of below grade level spellers, the article put forth a straightforward instructional plan. First, teachers, particularly in grades three through six, need to diagnose where their students are operating along a continuum of spelling knowledge. Once a "spelling instructional level" (third grade, fourth grade, etc.) is determined for groups of children within a classroom and appropriate spelling materials located for each group, the traditional practice of having children study, memorize, and take weekly tests on graded lists of words should be instituted. Finally, the key to an effective spelling program is the establishment of a strong classroom writing program. Students should write

frequently on a variety of topics, and the teacher should both monitor and comment on the children's spelling through an editing phase of the writing process.

To this author's knowledge there is little controlled, experimental research to support the idea of within-class ability grouping for spelling instruction. On the other hand, language arts educators, over the years, have often argued that individual differences in spelling ability should be considered by the classroom teacher (Greene & Petty, 1971; Hillerich, 1982; Stauffer, 1975). Furthermore, several recent studies have found that children's spelling accuracy on a grade level list of words (i.e., fourth graders spelling fourth grade words) is related to the quality of their misspellings on the same list (Manolakes, 1975; Morris, Nelson, & Perney, 1986; Schlagal, 1982, 1986). This finding certainly provides indirect support for grouping children for spelling instruction according to ability or instructional level. That is, the poor or low accuracy speller seems to lack reasonable spelling strategies (orthographic knowledge) at grade level (remember Frederick), and therefore will be at a disadvantage if placed in a whole class, grade-level spelling program.

Should teachers ability-group for spelling instruction? For a teacher whose intellectual curiosity has been aroused by the arguments put forth in this article, a first step would be to administer a grade level spelling list (see Appendix) to his/her class, and then quickly analyse the

results quantitatively (% correct) and qualitatively (sophistication of the errors). That is how Mrs. Jones began.

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Semi-Phonetic	Phonetic (Letter-Name)	Transitional	Correct
M, ML	MAL	MALLE	mail
B, BK	BAC		back
C, CD	SID	SIED	side
S, SC	STEK	STIK	stick
F, FT	FET	FEAT	feet
J, JS	DRAS	DRES	dress

Figure 1. Developmental Spelling Stages

Table 1. Fourth Grade Students' Accuracy Scores on a List of 25 Fourth Grade Spelling Words.

Student	# correct	%	Student	# correct	%
1	25	100%	14	15	60%
2	24	96%	15	14	56%
3	22	88%	16	13	52%
4 (Thomas)	21	84%	17	13	52%
5	20	80%	18	13	52%
6	20	80%	19	11	44%
7	19	76%	20	10	40%
8	19	76%	21	8	32%
9	18	72%	22 (Frederick)	8	32%
10	18	72%	23	7	28%
11	17	68%	24	6	24%
12 (Bernice)	16	64%	25	5	20%
13	15	60%	26	3	12%

Table 2. Spelling Errors Made by Three Children Performing at Different Accuracy Levels.

Spelling Word	Thomas (84% correct)	Bernice (64% correct)	Frederick (32% correct)
force	✔	✔	FORSE
nature	✔	NATCHURE	NATCHER
curl	✔	✔	CRLU
preparing	✔	✔	PREPRING
pebble	✔	PEBLE	PEPLE
popped	POPED	POPED	POPED
doctor	✔	✔	DROCER
badge	✔	BAGE	BAGE
cabbage	✔	CABBEGE	CBAGE
stared	STAIRED	STAIRED	STARDE
gravel	✔	✔	GRAVLE
traffic	✔	✔	TRAFTCK
scurry	✔	SCURY	SCRUE
camel	CAMLE	CAMMEL	CAMLE
silent	✔	✔	SILINT
checked	✔	✔	CHEKED
slammed	SLAMED	SLAMED	SLAND

Table 3. Low Fourth Grade Spellers' Accuracy Scores on a List of 25 Third Grade Spelling Words.

Student	Fourth Grade List (% correct)	Third Grade List (% correct)
21	32%	68%
22 (Frederick)	32%	60%
23	28%	52%
24	24%	52%
25	20%	44%
26	12%	32%

APPENDIX

Graded Spelling Lists from the Qualitative Inventory of Word Knowledge (Schlagal,1982)

LEVEL I	LEVEL II	LEVEL III	LEVEL IV	LEVEL V	LEVEL VI
girl	traded	send	force	lunar	satisfied
want	cool	gift	nature	population	abundance
plane	beaches	rule	slammed	bushel	mental
drop	center	trust	curl	joint	violence
when	short	soap	preparing	compare	impolite
trap	trapped	batter	pebble	explosion	musician
wish	thick	knee	cellar	delivered	hostility
cut	plant	mind	market	normal	illustrate
bike	dress	scream	popped	justice	acknowledge
trip	carry	sight	harvest	dismiss	prosperity
flat	stuff	chain	doctor	decide	accustom
ship	try	count	stocked	suffering	patriotic
drive	crop	knock	gunner	stunned	impossible
fill	year	caught	badge	lately	correspond
sister	chore	noise	cattle	peace	admission
bump	angry	careful	gazed	amusing	wreckage
plate	chase	stepping	cabbage	reduction	commotion
mud	queen	chasing	plastic	preserve	sensible
chop	wise	straw	maple	settlement	dredge
bed	drove	nerve	stared	measure	conceive
	cloud	thirsty	gravel	protective	profitable
	grabbed	baseball	traffic	regular	replying
	train	circus	honey	offered	admitted
	shopping	handle	cable	division	introduction
	float	sudden	scurry	needle	operating
			camel	expression	decision
			silent	complete	combination
			cozy	honorable	declaration
			graceful	baggage	connect
			checked	television	patient

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